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UNITARIAN BELIEF

XI. The True Doctrine of Liberal Christianity

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SERMONS

OF

JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE.

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The True Doctrine of Liberal Christianity.

THE subject of my discourse is this: "What do we mean by Liberal Christianity?" And in order to show you, from the New Testament itself, that the religion of Jesus was, from the very first, a source of mental and moral freedom, I will read the following passages: —

"Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." — JOHN viii. 32.

"If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." — JOHN viii. 36.

"The law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death." — ROMANS viii. 2.

"The glorious liberty of the children of God." — ROMANS viii. 21.

"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." — 2 COR. iii. 17.

"Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." — GALATIANS v. 1.

From these passages we see that there is a real relation between Christian truth and freedom, and that Christianity, among its other blessings, has also given us liberty; that, somehow or other, the knowledge of the truth makes us free; that there is something glorious in this liberty, and that we are bound to stand fast in it, and not be subject to any yoke of bondage.

Such texts as these prove to us that there is such a thing as liberal Christianity; that it is a good thing, and that it is our duty to seek it.

If we turn from Scripture to history, we come to the

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same conclusion. The first result of the teaching of Jesus was to set his disciples free from the burdens of the Levitical law. This law was a heavy yoke of bondage. It made it a duty for every Jew to perform innumerable outward ceremonies in order to please God. These at last took the place of love, trust, righteousness, goodness. Therefore, Jesus refused to perform these ceremonies, and taught his disciples that they had no value. He walked on the Sabbath, and healed on the Sabbath. He set aside their rules in regard to ceremonial ablutions, and denounced traditions of the scribes and Pharisees as making the commands of God of none effect. He told them that the result of this attention to outside ceremonies and external ritual was the neglect of the inward life of love. He declared that he had come to break every yoke, and to let the oppressed go free. One of these yokes was the weight of superstition, which crushed mind and heart. He taught that the only essential thing, the one thing needful, was the love of truth and goodness, such as Mary showed when she sat at his feet and heard his words.

But, though Jesus taught this so plainly, his disciples did not understand it. They still thought it necessary to keep up Jewish ceremonies and to impose them on Gentile converts. Therefore, Paul was sent to break that yoke, and to settle once for all that every man is a Christian who believes in Jesus and takes him for his master. The battle was long and hard, and Paul was nearly overcome. But he fought the good fight to the end, and became the great apostle of Liberal Christianity.

Then, after many centuries, a great Christian ritual grew up and took the place of the Jewish ritual. Once more, forms, ceremonies, profession, outward observances,

took the place of inward trust, love, and goodness. Then Luther was raised up to teach again that these ceremonies crushed the life of the soul, and that only one thing was needful,— confidence in the love of God through Jesus Christ. So came Protestant Liberal Christianity.

But the Protestant Church, in turn, thought it necessary to add to this simple creed of faith and love a long list of articles of belief, which were called orthodox. No one can be a Christian, they said, who does not hold to these. Once more the dead belief, imposed on the soul from without, expelled the inward life of love. And then the Friends came, led by George Fox and William Penn, to teach that it is the light within which saves the soul, not creeds and forms. And then the Unitarians came, to show that no man is bound to believe any creed which does not seem to him true ; that what God asks of us is not conformity, but sincerity ; not blind submission, but honest conviction. They also declared that the one thing needful is inward goodness, goodness of heart and life. And this is what we now call Liberal Christianity.

Liberal Christianity, then, does not mean the liberty of believing what we choose, but freedom to believe the truth. And, in order to believe the truth, we must see it ourselves. It is not enough to have some one else tell it to us. Freedom of belief implies freedom of thought. We must be free to seek, to look, to search, to examine. Another man may lead us to the truth, show us the way to it, put it before our eyes ; but at last we must use our own mind in believing it, or we do not believe it at all.

The Church has always been so anxious for right opinions that it has often preferred assent to conviction. It

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has been more anxious to have men say that they believe than that they should really believe. Therefore, it has formulated its doctrines in creeds, confessions, and catechisms, and imposed them by its authority, denouncing as heretics those who did not accept them. On this account Liberal Christians have opposed creeds, declaring them a snare for weak consciences.

If by a creed is meant only a clear statement of what a man believes, it is not only innocent, but very desirable. Every one ought to have as distinct beliefs as he is able to attain. And, if two or more men who think the same thing unite together and declare that they agree in their opinions, there is no harm in that. Thus people unite to spread what they believe about the civil service, or about slavery, or about temperance. They try to disseminate their creed, and they do well.

Such is the innocent origin of religious creeds. But the time comes when these creeds are made tests of character, conditions of fellowship, or barriers in the way of thought; and then they have to be opposed by liberal Christians. Since Christ has told us that in his religion the love of truth and goodness is the one thing needful, we have no right to add other conditions to his. If he says to the heathen, who never heard of him, but who fed the hungry and clothed the naked, "Come, ye blessed of my Father!" what right have Christians to make new tests of character and conditions of fellowship? Shall we shut out those whom the Lord lets in? And if he did not denounce inquiry or check thought, if he did not set up any creed or formula, what right have we to say to the mind, "Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further"?

Liberal Christianity, then, in its negative form opposes

ritual, ceremonies, and outward ordinances, when taught as necessary to goodness. It opposes also creeds and confessions, when made a test of character or condition of fellowship. It claims the right to examine freely every doctrine and creed, in order to find better and higher truth.

But Liberal Christianity does not teach that it is of no consequence what men think about God, duty, or immortality. It claims freedom to inquire, because it believes truth to be all-important. It seeks in order to find. It does not seek merely for the pleasure of seeking. It is not mere free inquiry that it demands; it is not satisfied with the intellectual pursuit of knowledge; it does not believe in ever learning and never coming to the knowledge of the truth. The power of free inquiry is in the faith that truth can be found: otherwise, it were idle to seek. The result of agnosticism — that is, of thinking that nothing can be known — would simply be to put an end to all inquiry, all investigation, all intellectual activity, all progress in knowledge. It is the love of truth, and the belief in it, which makes the mind free.

More than this, we not only seek that we may find, but we seek because we have found. That is what Jesus teaches when he says, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Let us see how this is,— how it is that the knowledge of the truth makes us free.

We must first ask, What is man's natural freedom? what freedom has he to begin with?

Man's natural freedom is simply a power of choice,— to choose between this and that. But this natural freedom, many persons say, is no real freedom, because it is deter-

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mined inevitably and necessarily by motives. His will is always determined by the strongest motive. The force of circumstances, of habit, and of influences over which he has no control determines what he does. His freedom, therefore, say they, is only apparent, not real.

At the frequent discussions at which we have all assisted, between the advocates of Philosophical Necessity on the one hand and of Freedom of Will on the other, one possible answer is very often forgotten. When two courses of conduct are presented to the mind, can we choose freely between them? or is our choice necessarily determined by stringent influences arising within us from our organization, or by a stress of circumstances acting from without? Some will say, All men are free, and can choose between two courses of conduct, no matter what external or internal force of motives may be brought to bear upon them; and some will deny this, and declare it simply impossible for man not to be determined by the strongest motive. If not, say the advocates of determination, how could there be such a thing as character? Men would be one thing to-day, and another to-morrow. How idle to suppose that a man can change his nature, temperament, habits of feeling, moral associations, by a mere act of will! A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, even if it chooses so to do; and neither can a corrupt tree, by any amount of free will, bring forth good fruit. And then comes in the terrible doctrine of averages,—just such a percentage every year of murders, suicides, burglaries, which by the working of these stern laws are kept up to the average, thus reviving on a lower plane the old theological doctrine that so many men and angels, no more and no less, have been ordained from all eternity to be

saved or to be lost; and to these arguments and a multitude like them the advocates of human freedom are often reduced to a single answer, that of Dr. Samuel Johnson,—"Sir! I know that I am free, and that is all that can be said about it."

But may there not be another alternative besides the simple "Yes" or "No"? Is it not possible that some men are free and others not? May not the faculty of freedom be wholly latent, undeveloped, and inoperative in some, perhaps the majority, of mankind? May there not be others in whom this mysterious power, because acting without law, acts ineffectively, producing no definite results in conduct or character? Let me illustrate what I mean by a single comparison.

Let us compare the human being to a ship at sea, and the power of freedom to the steersman with his helm. All he can do at any moment is evidently only to turn the vessel's head to the right or the left. And so in man's soul, the natural will can only, when a motive is presented, yield to it or resist it. It can lean one way or the other,—that is all. It can say "Yes" or "No," or it can say nothing. If it exerts itself at all, its effort is limited to these directions of assent or refusal. The testimony of consciousness is simply this: that we have this power of throwing our weight one way or the other, for or against the desire or motive which is presented to us.

If this were all, what would human freedom accomplish? Evidently, nothing.

Let us return to our vessel. The man at the helm can at any moment turn the rudder to the right or left, and so direct the head of the vessel to starboard or port. But suppose he has no compass, no chart, no fixed star in the

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sky, nothing to tell him which way to go. Let him steer as he pleases, then, the result will be the same. He will be driven by the winds; he will drift with the currents. He will be no better than a floating log, and any one who knows the ocean currents and the steady course of the winds can infallibly predict to what shore his vessel will finally arrive.

If man has nothing to steer by, no fixed convictions, no permanent principles of action, he becomes in like manner, notwithstanding his freedom, the helpless slave of impulse and circumstance. If his inborn and inherited tendencies are good, and circumstances favorable, his character will be good, his conduct virtuous. If he has inherited other tendencies, and grows up under unfavorable circumstances, he will be what we call a bad man. He will deserve no credit for his goodness in the one case, and no blame for his evil in the other. That is to say, he will not be blamable, provided he has had no opportunity of knowing the truth and acquiring fixed regulative principles of conduct. He will be unfortunate, degraded, and unhappy, but not to blame.

But now let us provide our sailor with a ship's compass, accurate charts and instruments, and let him have a distinct purpose in his voyage. He wishes, we will say, to sail from New York to Canton in China. Then, having only the same power that he had before, of steering to the right or to the left, the result will be that, let the winds blow or the currents drift as they will, he is almost sure to reach his port at last. He knows the truth, and the truth makes him free. His chart tells him which way to steer. His compass enables him to keep his ship's head in that direction. His log shows him how fast he

is running. His daily observations of the sun and stars show him where he is. Knowledge has made him free to do what he wishes to do, to go where he wishes to go.

Or let us suppose that a man is walking in a vast forest. He has lost his way. There is no path which he can follow, he has no compass, the sun or stars are behind clouds, he knows none of the signs of the woods. Still, he is perfectly free to go where he will: he has all his natural freedom. He can choose at every moment whether to go forward or backward, to the right or left. But this power of choice avails him nothing. If he finds his way out, it will be by accident. His freedom therefore, evidently, is not real freedom. It accomplishes nothing. He cannot do what he wishes to do.

But now give this man a guide, or let the stars come out to show him where the north lies, and he becomes really free. Now he can go where he wants to go. Knowledge has set him free. He knows the truth, and the truth makes him free.

But suppose this man is tied to a tree. Now he feels wholly helpless. If he succeeds in breaking these chains, he exults in his freedom. But we have seen that his freedom will be practically useless to him unless he has some method of finding his way.

Human freedom, then, originally exists in all men in a rudimental form. It is only the power of choice, and as such may amount practically to nothing. This undeveloped freedom will not save a man from being the slave of appetite, passion, circumstances. But this same power, when joined with a knowledge of the truth, becomes self-directive. Self-direction is real freedom, and the only kind that is of any value. In this sense, knowledge is power.

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But knowledge is of two kinds, knowledge of temporal things and knowledge of eternal things. The first makes us free to do the work which begins and ends in time, the second to accomplish that which belongs to eternity. Just as the knowledge of temporal facts and laws emancipates the will and enables it to accomplish great results in time, so the knowledge of God frees the soul from the chains of sense and sin, and enables it to begin a career of endless progress onward and upward. "This is life eternal," says the master, "to know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." This knowledge of God is the essence of religion, the source of goodness, the principle of progress, and constitutes salvation here and salvation hereafter.

Liberal Christianity, then, does not merely mean destroying the power of old creeds and the authority of churches and synods. It is not enough to show men that they are not bound to submit to the pope, not obliged to accept orthodoxy. When you do this, you have only broken the man's chains; but you have not yet given him a guide through the wilderness of life. Real freedom comes only when you give him some principles, some convictions, by which he can guide his steps. Then he knows the truth, and the truth makes him free.

A liberal Christian is not a man who can show the errors of orthodoxy, or point out mistakes in the Old or New Testament. He may do all this, and not be one whit more liberal than his opponents. Some fetters have been taken from his limbs, but he may still be the slave of prejudice, passion, ignorance, conceit. To find out the mistakes of other men will not make him free, unless he has some deeper truth in his own soul, some stronger,

clearer, better conviction by which to direct his path. For freedom is self-direction, and until one is able to direct himself he will be guided by others. If not the slave of a creed, he will be the slave of his own prejudices, passions, and habits; the slave of appetite, the slave of temptation, of example, of popular opinion and usage. That man alone is really free who is able to guide himself by some high principle of truth and right.

All human freedom has been won by the power of faith. It takes a higher belief to deliver man from a lower one. Paul broke the fetters of Judaism by faith in the gospel of Jesus, by the power of a new life in his soul. Luther broke the fetters of the Roman Church by faith in the immediate presence and help of God. Liberal Christians can conquer false doctrines only by faith in some higher, nobler, and better truths. Only true religion can cast out superstition. "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." The freedom with which Christ makes us free is this: that he causes every man to see himself as the child of God, responsible to God alone for his thoughts and actions. He places man ever in the eye of his great Taskmaster, always in the presence of the divine tribunal. What are kings or princes or bishops to him? To all of them he says, when they command him to believe or do anything opposed to the divine will: "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard." This inward law of obedience to God is above all other law. It is the strength of the martyr, the power of the prophet, the inspiration of the patriot and the reformer. It breaks at last every yoke. It is the power which

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carries forward the world, and pours new life into the souls of men.

Liberal Christianity does not, then, mean a religion which is emancipated from law, but one in which the lower law is always subject to the higher. The language of the New Testament on this point is very striking: "The law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made us free from the law of sin and death." "Whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty and continueth therein."

We can see the meaning of this by comparing the nations in which there is the most freedom with those in which there is the least. There is more freedom in England than in Russia, and there is also more of a government by law. In one country the law rules, in the other only the despotic will of the ruler. Just so far as the people are governed by law, and not by will, they become free. Just so far as a man governs himself by law, and not by will, he, also, becomes free. The higher the law is by which he governs himself, the more power it gives him to accomplish great and good things, the more of life it puts into him, and the more he is able to fulfil the ends of his being.

This gives us another definition of true freedom. Every creature is free according as it is able to unfold its powers, and to develop its faculties according to the law of its whole nature. The bird is free when it can fly through the air to satisfy its wants, the fish when it can freely cleave the stream, and man when he can obey the laws of his being, and act out his physical, intellectual, and moral nature according to the highest law of God. God's service in this sense is perfect freedom.

The view most commonly held has been that it is not

safe to trust the nature of man in its efforts to reach this end; that he ought to be restrained, guided, governed by other men, according to the rules and methods which experience has shown to be the best.

But Liberal Christianity, while it admits and believes that we should pay deference to the lessons of old experience, has confidence in human nature. It believes that God has not left himself without a witness in every soul, that all men have moral and spiritual instincts, and that these instincts can be trusted. Offer advice, counsel, help, but do not undertake to control and govern the conscience or the heart of your brother man. Liberal Christianity accepts the command of Jesus, "Be not ye called master; for one is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren."

The Church of Rome has carried further than any other the theory that men are to be kept under constant restraint and discipline. It has done this conscientiously. It thinks itself bound to prescribe what its children shall believe, what books they shall not read, and by its sacrament of confession it directs every man's conscience, and tells him on what conditions it can absolve him from sin. It may sometimes seem to us that this thoroughly organized system for guiding, restraining, and educating the soul is a good thing,— better than our Protestant method of leaving men to govern themselves. But look at the result of the two systems on the large scale. What, for example, do we see in Italy, where this system has been tried so thoroughly and for so long a time, where the Roman Church has had full control of the popular mind for hundreds of years, where Protestant ideas were never allowed to be expressed, where no Protestant church was

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ever tolerated, where even among the mountains of Savoy the poor peasants who were supposed to be tainted with heresy were driven from their homes and slain, until Milton roused Europe to the feeling of their wrongs in a sonnet which sounds like a trumpet-blast, and Cromwell, by putting his hand on the hilt of his sword, terrified the princes and tyrants into decency? What has been the result of this Italian system of repression? This,—that the city of Rome has become alienated from the Papacy, and that there is no such dislike for the Catholic Church anywhere as in Italy.

The same state of things exists in Spain, from which every trace of heresy was rooted out by the Inquisition. Spain still professes to be a Catholic country, and does not allow any public Protestant worship. But Spain, by two decrees of the Cortes, suppressed all the convents and monasteries and confiscated their property. A hundred years ago there were in Spain 188,000 priests and prelates: now there are only about 40,000.

Meantime, in the United States, where all religions exist in entire freedom, there is a constant increase from decade to decade of the number of churches, of church property, of church attendance and church teachers. And in this prosperity Roman Catholics share equally with Protestants.

Liberal Christianity says: Let us carry this beneficent principle still farther. Do not make a man's religious opinions any longer a test of character or a condition of fellowship. Let all the denominations, which are now struggling, independently and separately, to build up their own sects and churches, unite to carry forward the work of their common Master. Instead of insisting that Christianity consists in beliefs about the Trinity, the Atone-

ment, the Bible, or future punishment, make it consist, as Jesus himself made it, in doing the will of the heavenly Father, in a good life, in humanity, in fidelity and honesty, in love to God and man. Liberal Christianity says: Let all the churches agree to work together, shoulder to shoulder, side by side, on this basis, and God's kingdom will come, and the voices of infidelity be silenced. Instead of insisting that no one can be a Christian who has doubts about the literal truth of the whole Bible, let the Bible stand on its own foundation as a book which has been and is a blessing to mankind, which has taught humility to the proud, justice to the powerful, and charity to all. Instead of refusing fellowship to the man who believes that the mercy of God endures forever, and that he loves all his children in the other world, just as he loves them all here, encourage all men to examine, to discuss, to reason on these themes as they are able, sure that this will be the best way of finding and upholding the truth. In fine, Liberal Christianity believes it safe to trust the human conscience and the human reason; it believes in a present Providence and a Holy Spirit which is with us to-day, inspiring us, when we are willing to accept and follow its heavenly leadings.

I once asked a leading member of the Bible Society why it continued to print and circulate passages which the best scholars of all denominations admitted to be spurious. His answer was that, if people were once allowed to think that there were any errors in the Bible, they would lose their faith in the whole book. I asked an intelligent minister of the Episcopal Church why it did not leave out of its Prayer Book the doctrine of regeneration by baptism. He said that they were afraid that, if they once began to alter the Prayer Book, they might not know where to stop.

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I replied, "Then you think the Holy Spirit was in the Church to help your fathers make the Prayer Book, but is not in the Church now to help you to alter and improve it." I once saw it stated as a reason for maintaining the doctrine of everlasting punishment that to give it up would be to cut the sinews of effective preaching. In like manner it was recently said, on a public occasion, that to admit that the heathen could be saved without the knowledge of Christ would be to cut the nerve of missionary enterprise. All such arguments show a want of faith in God, as well as a want of trust in man. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." He who believes in a present God, a present Saviour, a present Spirit, he who believes that God is as near us now as he ever was, as ready to help us as he was to help the seers and prophets of old, walks at liberty, seeking only the precepts of God. Arguments from fear and from expediency do not disturb him. He trusts in the power of truth, in the inspiration of the Spirit, and the guidance of Divine Providence.

This is the glorious liberty of the sons of God, that they do not trust in a dead past, but in a living present. They believe that God is waiting to be gracious to us today, that he has continually new and better things to give us than he has ever yet given to the world. They believe that Christ is to reign more and more in human hearts and lives, and that all the past triumphs of his gospel are nothing compared with those which are still to come. They wish to take down every barrier which is in the way of his coming. They would break every yoke, not because they wish for a lawless freedom, but because they desire that all men should look into the perfect law of liberty, and continue therein. They do not wish for less

religion, but more; a deeper sense of the presence of God, of the steady and universal influence of his Spirit, and the perfect law of his providence.

In a discourse on spiritual freedom Dr. Channing said: —

"I call that mind free which masters the senses, conquers and controls the appetites, and spends life in hungering after righteousness."

"I call that mind free which escapes the bondage of matter, and passes beyond the material universe to its Creator."

"I call that mind free which jealously guards its own intellectual rights, and calls no man master; which opens itself to light, no matter whence it comes, and receives new truth as an angel from heaven."

"I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love; which is not imprisoned in any sect, but recognizes in all human beings the image of God."

"I call that mind free which protects itself against the usurpations of society, does not cower to human opinion, and respects a higher law than fashion, and will not be the slave of the many or the few."

"I call that mind free which fears nothing but doing wrong, and is calm in the midst of tumults, and self-possessed, though all else be lost."

"I call that mind free which guards its own freedom, and keeps an empire over itself, devoting itself faithfully to unfolding its own powers, hoping to advance forever, and finding inexhaustible power in the prospect of immortality."

This is what we mean by Liberal Christianity. Is it not worth while to devote ourselves to maintain, defend, and extend such a faith as this?

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